

We claim:

1 1. A method of enhancing voice mail messages by incorporating a selected background
2 sound with a voice mail message for playback to a listener.

1 2. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the voice mail message comprises a plurality of
2 message segments, and wherein one or more selected background sounds are incorporated, each
3 of which is associated with one or more of the message segments.

1 3. The method according to Claim 1, wherein a plurality of background sounds are selected
2 to be incorporated with the voice mail message.

1 4. The method according to Claim 2 or Claim 3, wherein at least one of the background
2 sounds provides emotional cues for the voice mail message.

1 5. The method according to Claim 2, wherein at least one of the background sounds is a
2 theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail message.

1 6. The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of inserting a selected audio
2 file into the voice mail message for the playback to the listener.

1 7. The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of

2 inserting one or more selected audio files into the voice mail message for the playback to
3 the listener.

1 8. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is selected by a
2 speaker of the voice mail message.

1 9. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are selected programmatically.

1 10. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a default
2 background sound for a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 11. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a
2 dynamically-selected choice selected from among a plurality of background sounds.

1 12. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available on a
3 telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message originates.

1 13. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available from a
3 subscription service.

1 14. The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed randomly.

1 15. The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed using a profile associated with a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 16. The method according to Claim 12 or Claim 13, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed based upon an identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message.

1 17. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is a single
2 selection that is available on a telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message
3 originates.

1 18. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an
3 apparatus on which the voice mail message is recorded.

1 19. The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more selected background sounds
2 are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available from a
3 telephone company system through which the voice mail message passes as the voice mail
4 message is being left for the listener.

1 20. The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of transmitting the selected
2 background sound from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail
3 message.

1 21. The method according to Claim 20, wherein the selected background sound has been
2 compressed prior to the transmitting.

1 22. The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of transmitting identifiers of
2 each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker
3 of the voice mail message.

1 23. The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of transmitting an address
2 of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a
3 speaker of the voice mail message, wherein each address may be used to locate a file containing a
4 respective one of the selected background sounds.

1 24. The method according to Claim 23, wherein the address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

1 25. The method according to Claim 12, further comprising the step of loading one or more
2 new background sounds onto the telephone or telephone system, thereby revising the plurality of
3 background sounds that are available.

1 26. The method according to Claim 18, further comprising the step of loading one or more
2 new background sounds onto the apparatus, thereby revising the plurality of background sounds
3 that are available.

1 27. The method according to Claim 19, further comprising the step of loading one or more
2 new background sounds onto the telephone company system, thereby revising the plurality of
3 background sounds that are available.

1 28. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound may be
2 selected using one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone
3 used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone;
4 automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the
5 speaker; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability,
6 which may be provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1 29. The method according to Claim 7, wherein the selected audio files may be selected using
2 one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker
3 of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone; automated
4 instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the speaker; a key
5 sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability, which may be
6 provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1 30. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the incorporating is performed by
2 conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice mail
3 message and a receiver thereof.

1 31. The method according to Claim 1, wherein the incorporating is performed during the
2 playback to the listener.

1 32. The method according to Claim 3, wherein the incorporating is performed prior to the
2 playback to the listener.

1 33. The method according to Claim 3, further comprising the steps of:
2 transmitting identifiers of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or
3 telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail message; and
4 using each of the transmitted identifiers to access a stored copy of the respective selected
5 background sound;
6 and wherein the incorporating step incorporates the accessed copies.

1 34. A method of enhancing voice mail messages by inserting a selected audio file into a voice
2 mail message for playback to a listener.

1 35. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the voice mail message comprises a plurality
2 of message segments, and wherein more than one audio file is inserted into the voice mail
3 message, or the selected audio file is inserted multiple times into the voice mail message.

1 36. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the inserted audio file provides additional
2 context for the voice mail message.

1 37. The method according to Claim 35, wherein at least one of the audio files is an audio
2 signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 38. The method according to Claim 37, further comprising the step of playing the audio
2 signature rather than the voice mail message to the listener.

1 39. The method according to Claim 37, further comprising the step of using the audio
2 signature to deduce information about the voice mail message.

1 40. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the voice mail message comprises the
2 selected audio file.

1 41. The method according to Claim 34, wherein the selected audio file is a theme song of a
2 speaker of the voice mail message.

1 42. An apparatus for improving voice mail messaging, comprising:
2 means for transmitting a voice message from a user of the apparatus to a separately-
3 located recording means;
4 means for storing one or more pre-recorded sound files on the apparatus;
5 selection means for selecting, from the pre-recorded sound files, one or more of: (1) a
6 background sound and (2) an audio file to be transmitted; and
7 transmission means for transmitting the selection to the recording means for use with the
8 transmitted voice message.

1 43. A method of merchandising pre-recorded sound files, further comprising steps of:
2 receiving requests for selected ones of the pre-recorded sound files for use as background
3 files to be incorporated with voice mail messages and/or for use as audio files to be inserted into
4 voice mail messages; and
5 providing the selected ones, in response to the step of receiving requests.

1 44. The method according to Claim 43, wherein the receiving and providing steps are
2 implemented by a for-fee service provider.

1 45. The method according to Claim 43, wherein the receiving and providing steps are
2 implemented by marketing a telephone for use in improving distance communications.

1 46. A method of improving telephone conversations, comprising incorporating a selected
2 background sound into a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party.

1 47. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is a theme
2 song of the caller.

1 48. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the incorporating is performed by
2 conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between the caller and the called
3 party.

1 49. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is a default
2 background sound for the caller.

1 50. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is selected
2 programmatically.

1 51. The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is selected by
2 the caller.

1 52. A system for enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:
2 a voice mail message comprising one or more message segments;
3 one or more background sounds;

4 means for incorporating one or more of the background sounds with one or more of the
5 message segments; and

6 means for playing the voice mail message to a listener with the incorporated background
7 sounds.

1 53. The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the background sounds
2 provides emotional cues for the voice mail message.

1 54. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for inserting a selected audio
2 file into the voice mail message for the playback to the listener.

1 55. The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the selected background sounds
2 is selected by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 56. The system according to Claim 52, wherein at least one of the background sounds is a
2 default background sound for a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 57. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the one or more background sounds are
2 dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available on a
3 telephone or telephone system from which the voice mail message originates.

1 58. The system according to Claim 57, wherein the dynamic selection is performed randomly.

1 59. The system according to Claim 57, wherein the dynamic selection is performed based
2 upon an identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message.

1 60. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the one or more background sounds are
2 dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an
3 apparatus on which the voice mail message is recorded.

1 61. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for transmitting the selected
2 background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a speaker of the voice mail
3 message.

1 62. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for transmitting an address
2 of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone system used by a
3 speaker of the voice mail message, wherein each address may be used to locate a file containing a
4 respective one of the selected background sounds.

1 63. The system according to Claim 62, wherein the address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

1 64. The system according to Claim 52, further comprising means for loading one or more new
2 background sounds onto the apparatus, thereby revising the plurality of background sounds that
3 are available.

1 65. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the background sounds may be selected using
2 one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker
3 of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the telephone; automated
4 instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system of the speaker; a key
5 sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition capability, which may be
6 provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail message.

1 66. The system according to Claim 52, wherein the incorporating is performed by
2 conferencing the selected background sounds into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice
3 mail message and a receiver thereof.

1 67. A system of enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:
2 one or more audio files;
3 a voice mail message comprising one or more message segments;
4 means for selecting at least one of the audio files; and
5 means for inserting the selected at least one audio file into the voice mail message for
6 playback to a listener.

1 68. The system according to Claim 67, wherein at least one of the audio files is an audio
2 signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 69. A system for improving telephone conversations, comprising:

2 means for establishing a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party; and

3 means for incorporating one or more background sounds into the telephone conversation.

1 70. The system according to Claim 69, wherein the means for incorporating further comprises

2 means for conferencing the one or more background sounds into a 3-way call between the caller

3 and the called party.

1 71. The system according to Claim 69, wherein the one or more background sounds are

2 selected by the caller.

1 72. A computer program product for enhancing voice mail messages, the computer program

2 product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:

3 computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more background sounds;

4 and

5 computer-readable program code means for incorporating the selected background

6 sounds with a voice mail message for playback to a listener.

1 73. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein at least one of the

2 background sounds is a theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail message.

1 74. The computer program product according to Claim 72, further comprising means for
2 inserting one or more selected audio files into the voice mail message for the playback to the
3 listener.

1 75. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sounds are selected programmatically.

1 76. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sound are dynamically-selected choices selected from among a plurality of background sounds.

1 77. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sounds are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available
3 from a subscription service.

1 78. The computer program product according to Claim 77, wherein the dynamic selection is
2 performed using a profile associated with a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 79. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein a particular one of the
2 selected background sounds is a selection that is available on a telephone or telephone system
3 from which the voice mail message originates.

1 80. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the selected background
2 sounds are dynamically selected from among a plurality of background sounds that are available
3 from a telephone company system through which the voice mail message passes as the voice mail
4 message is being left for the listener.

1 81. The computer program product according to Claim 72, further comprising means for
2 transmitting identifiers of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone or telephone
3 system used by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 82. The computer program product according to Claim 74, wherein the selected audio files
2 may be selected using one or more of: a dual-tone multi-frequency (DTMF) capability of a
3 telephone used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive display screen of the
4 telephone; automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or a telephone system
5 of the speaker; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a voice recognition
6 capability, which may be provided by a voice messaging system which records the voice mail
7 message.

1 83. The computer program product according to Claim 72, wherein the computer-readable
2 program code means for incorporating further comprises computer-readable program code means
3 for conferencing the selected background sounds into a 3-way call between a speaker of the voice
4 mail message and a receiver thereof.

1 84. A computer program product for enhancing voice mail messages, the computer program
2 product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:

3 computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more audio files; and

4 computer-readable program code means for inserting the selected audio files into a voice
5 mail message for playback to a listener.

1 85. The computer program product according to Claim 84, wherein at least one of the audio
2 files is an audio signature associated with a speaker who records the voice mail message.

1 86. A computer program product for improving telephone conversations, the computer
2 program product embodied on one or more computer-readable media and comprising:

3 computer-readable program code means for selecting one or more background sounds;

4 and

5 computer-readable program code means for incorporating the selected background sounds
6 into a telephone conversation between a caller and a called party.

1 87. The computer program product according to Claim 86, wherein at least one of the
2 selected background sounds is a theme song of the caller.

1 88. The computer program product according to Claim 86, wherein the computer-readable
2 program code means for incorporating further comprises computer-readable program code means

3 for conferencing the selected background sound into a 3-way call between the caller and the
4 called party.